

Wasafiri

Interview with Jafar Panahi

Shiva Rahbaran

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I want everybody to know, that we are the sand at the bottom of the river. We stay where we are and those who have violently seized our dwelling and think that they have thrown us into exile are doomed to go away – like the river, they too will flow away. The secret of our success is that we have not severed our connection with this land and the people who live in it.

Jafar Panahi

Considering the dramatic turn of fate in Jafar Panahi’s life and film-making career in December 2010, the quote above¹, gives me a shudder today, less than eighteen months after the Green Movement was formed in response to the widespread protests against the Islamic Regime of Iran and its fraudulent presidential elections of 2009. The films that Jafar Panahi, an important contemporary Iranian film-maker, has made in the past two decades not only put him on the list of the most interesting and respected film-makers worldwide, but have also led him before the infamous Islamic Republic’s courts of injustice, where, like many other

¹ My interview with Panahi, which took place in June 2007, will be printed at the end of this foreword in my own translation. This interview is part of a collection of interviews with a number of renowned film-makers living and working in Iran, whom I met and talked to at their homes and studios. The collection will come out in the original Persian language this year.

fearless Iranian artists, he has been subjected to draconic punishments for insisting on his right to practice his art freely.

Panahi sees himself as an *engagé* film-maker – as an artist who has a moral and social commitment, yet distances himself from all ideological and political propaganda. His only commitment is to depict in his films social and historical reality as he ‘feels’ it. In other words, he sees his social realism as the exact opposite of ‘politically oriented’ films. In Panahi’s eyes, the cinema in Iran – both before and after the Revolution of 1979 – has always been a kind of resistance against ruling dogmas. This resistance is especially effective as the language of cinema is both broad and immediate; it embodies all other arts - photography, painting, poetry, storytelling, architecture, music - and can communicate with a large audience directly. Moreover, in Iran cinema was and still is to a large extent the opposite of an ‘elitist’ art, in the sense that it does not require its audience to possess literacy or ‘intellectuality’ in order to enjoy it. On the contrary, Iranian cinema can be grasped in some degree by everyone from all layers of society. In this respect, Panahi sees cinema as a ‘classless’ or ‘egalitarian’ realm, where all people could realise themselves. Nevertheless, he believes that this should not make the film-maker a slave of the market or the ‘masses’. The artist should not end up making films only according to the tastes of a broad audience. The ‘broad’ and ‘egalitarian’ nature of cinema should only make the film-maker aware that, unlike, say, a poet, the creation of his or her art is a collective project within the reality in which he or she operates. Panahi is always aware that film-making involves group work and that once a film is released it will be seen (or consumed) by thousands (or even millions) of viewers.

For Panahi it is vital to make his films in Iran. Recently, the Court of Revolution in Tehran imposed on Panahi the draconic punishment of six years imprisonment and a twenty-year ban on any kind of artistic activity because of his so-called ‘anti-revolutionary’ activities and participation in protest movements such as the Green Movement against the Islamic regime. Panahi, however, has always been prepared to pay a high price for his artistic commitment to his people and country. Despite many offers from foreign production companies, being a ‘social film-maker’, he believes that he could only work within a society that he is intellectually and emotionally attached to. After the revolution, this task became pivotal for him. He notes that during the rule of the Islamic regime, more than during any other period in modern Iran’s history, numerous censorship policies have been introduced and countless serious attempts have been made to isolate the artist from his or her audience.

From Panahi's point of view, it is especially now that the *engagé* artist must fulfil his or her foremost task; namely to resist.

*Shiva Rahbaran*²: Mr. Panahi, the aim of this project is to find out the role of cinema in the revolutionised and post-revolutionary Iranian society from the viewpoint of those film-makers who live and work in contemporary Iran. So, the main question in this undertaking is, has cinema influenced the post-revolutionary society in Iran, and if so, in what ways rapidly in the last; and in what ways has it been influenced by that society in its turn? Our approach is thus sociological rather than aesthetic. From our point of view, cinema lends itself to such a study, as it is often considered a 'people's art': some people even go as far as to say that cinema started off as – and still is – the art of the masses, of the working and lower classes in society, who were often illiterate and could not connect with more elitist arts, such as poetry or painting, where a degree of 'traditional', basic school education is necessary to enjoy them. So, could such a medium aim to bring changes in a society by being, say, educational or morally and socially 'committed'?

Jafar Panahi: The answer to this question can only be found in the work of each individual film-maker. I cannot generalise and speak for my colleagues. We have to see how we can find an answer to this question by looking at the path that a film-maker has taken and the destination that he or she has reached. I can say about myself that I make realist-social films. My *sujets* are social issues, problems and dilemmas that I see everyday. These issues could be of a, say, geographical nature, or of a cultural, economical or political nature. I always derive these issues from the society in which I live and I try to observe and process them or tackle them in my films. An Iranian realist-social film-maker can only ever live in Iran. He or she cannot live outside Iran and make films about the social reality of this country. If he or she did [live outside Iran], his view, his or her films would be of a 'touristy' nature. What I mean by a 'touristy' view is a view from outside, which by nature is transitory. A 'tourist' film-maker has not lived at the heart of this society; has not felt it through all his or her senses in his or her everyday life. But a film-maker like me, who lives in this country, faces and feels these social problems on an everyday basis. These social problems nudge us constantly. Our reactions to and preoccupations with these 'nudges' are our films. Through

² The interview took place at Panahi's home in Tehran in June 2007, two years before the fraudulent re-election of Ahmadinejad took place.

our films we see, show and process the problems in our society, but where these films lead – that we cannot know.

SR: So, this means that you are a politically aware and committed film-maker?

JP: This is where the difference between a politically and a socially committed film-maker lies: a socially committed film-maker is not necessarily political. I believe that political film-makers always use their art as an instrument through which they show what is wrong or right from their party's or ideology's point of view. So, it is the party or the ideology that classifies the political film-maker. As socially committed film-makers, we believe that we are the opposite of political film-makers. The reason why we distance ourselves from political film-makers is first and foremost the short life of political films. A political film has only a very short-lived effect on viewers. It has a use-by-date, which expires as soon as the ideology of the political film-maker goes past its date. So, a political film can only be enjoyed as long as the political ideology that infuses it is *en vogue*. I do not believe that any political film can endure. It 'dies' as soon as its maker's ideology dies. Or, at least, the value of his work drops considerably. But when I say that I am a social film-maker, I mean that in my films I 'express' society in the way that I have felt it by living in it. I do not give any opinions about what is good or bad. I do not make any political statements or give any moral lessons.

SR: You are saying that a social film-maker is the exact opposite of a political film-maker.

JP: That is correct. When somebody is dependent on the ideology of a certain party, for them any views against that ideology is dismissed – in other words, it is 'condemned to death'. Such a film-maker must constantly turn a blind eye when his or her ideology 'does not work'. I don't like this attitude. Such film-makers constantly have to make compromises with the official ideology of their party and I don't like that. In contrast to political film-makers, we, social film-makers, never talk about what or who is good or bad. We just show the conditions under which we live now and which have led our society to its current state – with all the problems and issues that come with it.

This does not mean that we are victims of political apathy. We are aware of the reality – also of the political reality – in which our society exists. We know that the source of all changes and developments lies underneath the layers of state policies. That is about the most

political that we ever get. For example, we would make a film about the restrictions that threaten our artistic activities on an everyday basis. In such a film we would be asking: ‘where do these restrictions come from?’ We, too, in the course of our aesthetic endeavour will ultimately encounter politics. I mean, we do not end up accusing one or two officers or revolutionary guards! What we want to achieve is to make the viewer find out where the roots of the symptoms lie – the point where he or she can see that religion, politics, economics, culture and even geography are all interrelated and are both the cause and the remedy of social problems. All these factors are inseparable. I make such films without taking any political position. A political film-maker, in contrast to a social film-maker like me, will always take a political stand. What I do is call out to the viewer and say: ‘look, this is the society we live in. Now it’s your turn to see – according to your own perception, your own point of view and your own attention span - where the roots of our shortcomings are; where the sources of our problems lie’. So, in short, through my films I do two things simultaneously: firstly, I nudge my society, so that it starts thinking about itself. And secondly, I provide history with a report. For example, if you watch my films – *The Circle*, *The Crimson Gold* or *Off-side* – again in, say, twenty or thirty years, you’ll see that that was the way people in Iran lived back then, or those were the problems and restrictions they were confronted with on an everyday basis. So, in that sense, I provide history with a report about Iranians in the particular period during which I lived and observed them. I produce an immediate report – I don’t need a mediator to render my own picture of my society during the time in which I lived and observed it. Now it’s up to the viewer to gain his or her lesson or whatever else from this report. That’s why I don’t condemn anybody in my film, *Off-side*. That soldier, who stops the girls from going to the stadium to watch the game, is a member of this society. Military service is obligatory by law in Iran, and a soldier must follow orders. That same soldier who has to stop the girls from watching the game could be the brother or the cousin of any of those girls. They are all together prisoners of this society and, in fact, there is no difference between the prisoner and the prisoner’s guard.

SR: Through your art, you and many of your colleagues could free yourselves from this prison; from this system and its censorship policies. By making excellent films, you have been able to secure a lot of international attention and in a way become a privileged member of this society with more opportunities and freedoms than the ordinary Iranian. There are quite a few artists, critics, and scholars who believe that Iranian art and literature in general and Iranian cinema in particular have thrived immensely after the revolution due to the very

censorship policies that try to suppress them. They think that censorship has the reverse [of its intended] effect and adds to the importance and popularity of the artist and his or her work amongst his or her people. Some even go as far as to say – perhaps with a touch of cynicism – that censorship is conducive to art. What do you say to that?

JP: If we looked at it this way, then we'd be in favour of censorship and we'd be cooperating with a system like the Islamic Republic of Iran. If censorship is good for art and freedom is bad for it, are we supposed to introduce censorship into all free countries, so that art can thrive? No, we cannot claim such a thing. If we claimed that, then we'd be working against art. Perhaps one could say that censorship has influenced our art, our films, immensely; but if the artist were not an able artist and did not possess a fair amount of creative imagination then he or she wouldn't have been able to make use of those restrictions in order to produce a good work of art. It's only a good artist who knows how to expand his or her creativity through restrictive policies. That same artist would also thrive in a free society and learn to use its structures to produce good works – he or she might even make better films in such a society than he or she would in a closed and highly restrictive one. What makes those people speak in favour of censorship might be the fact that many artists in Iran have to be extremely creative in order to both overcome the hurdles of censorship and also say what they want to say without vexing the system too much. On the other hand, the reality in Iran shows us that the authorities are vexed by our films and artwork, no matter how hard we try to take into consideration their censorship policies. They will still refuse to grant us permission to show our films and try everything they can in order to sabotage our work, even after they have allowed us to show our work, even if we have paid close attention to their restrictive guidelines.

SR: In my last book about Iran, *Iranian Writers Uncensored: Democracy, Freedom, and the Word in Contemporary Iran*,³ I [describe how I] sat down and talked to poets and writers who live and work in post-revolutionary Iran about their difficult task in such a society. What was especially interesting was that they compared their own restrictions and freedoms with those of film-makers. From their point of view, censorship was much harder upon them than upon film-makers. They believed that their books would face huge obstructions if they focused ever so slightly on a love scene, described the beautiful face of a woman, or depicted social dilemmas and unrests. Film-makers on the other hand, had a much easier time. Many

³ This book will come out in autumn 2011 by Dalkey Archive Press, London, in Nilou Mobasser's English translation.

internationally renowned films – despite censorship policies – depict scenes and subjects that would get writers or poets into trouble with the authorities. Is this not a paradoxical situation, especially considering that a novel or poetic anthology has a much smaller audience compared to cinema?

JP: The situation of literature is very different from that of cinema. When a writer writes a book that is not to the liking of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, they just take his or her book and prohibit publication! Nobody in the world would notice that or raise his or her voice for the author. Iranian cinema, on the other hand, has now achieved international prominence so when a [highly or moderately famous] film-maker gets into trouble with the authorities, he or she can count on worldwide protests, which can force the regime to compromise and show the film in one form or another; either in Iran or at a foreign festival. Perhaps contemporary Persian literature has not yet obtained the same respect it deserves on an international level as Iranian cinema.

Perhaps the fate of my film *The Circle* will make the situation of Iranian film clearer for you. The Ministry of Islamic Guidance would not give [me] permission to make this film. Many national and international newspapers got wind of this and started to criticise this policy: they asked, how could the Ministry stop a Cannes Festival winner, a Locarno Festival winner, from making his film? This went on for about nine months. All this was happening in the late 1990s, when Khatami had just been elected president in a landslide victory and people had pinned great hopes in his reformist policies and promises. Nobody knew how to make sense of this conundrum! After nine months and many protests, the Ministry decided to give me permission to make my film. I went and made my film exactly as I wanted to. I did not abide by the rules of any censorship or self-censorship. I did not bribe anybody and I did what I had to do. When the film came out, I knew what I had to do then! I went to the laboratory and took all the copies before they had the opportunity to send the film to the Ministry. I sent one copy to the Tehran Fajr Film Festival just to check whether they would grant a distribution licence or not. Some people at the Ministry actually quite liked the film and called me so that I would meet them and negotiate cuts and changes! But their efforts were to no avail. So they refused to show my film at the Fajr Film Festival. However, because of the earlier protests, the film had already had very good publicity and many members of the jury, from Iran and abroad, demanded to see the film. The Ministry of Islamic Guidance, however, refused to let them see it. Eventually, I asked six jurors to come and watch the film at my home. They liked it immensely and beseeched the Ministry of Guidance to at least give them

permission to show the film at festivals outside Iran. The Ministry, however, refused. To make rapidly in the last rapidly in the last a long story short, six months later, the head of the jury at the Venice Film Festival – one of the six foreign jurors who had seen my film at the private viewing in my house – announced that Panahi would participate in the Festival with his most recent film *The Circle*! Now the Ministry had a serious problem. If they refused to send a copy to Venice, everybody would know that a film was missing from the competition, right? Everybody would know that the government had sabotaged this renowned festival – and that, while President Khatami had been talking about a dialogue of cultures and open societies! So, three days before the festival started, my film and I were given permission to go to Venice and participate in the festival. Now, you tell me, which Iranian author or poet has such access to international publicity?

The status that Iranian films have achieved is such that international festivals go a long way to have them in their competition sections. It seems as if the world's thirst for knowledge about contemporary Iran can only be satisfied through films. Films can communicate faster and more immediately with their audiences; film-makers have greater access to multimedia publicity. An author or poet needs much longer to make himself or herself known; a reader needs a more creative imagination than a viewer in order to appreciate a book or a poem. And, don't forget, images can be consumed much faster than words – especially when you consider that Persian is a marginal language today and needs translation. I, as a film-maker, can give my audience an immediate, realist depiction of my society – just as one sees it with one's own eyes. Well, this has a deeper and sharper effect on a viewer.

SR: But you, as a film-maker, are coming from the land of flowers, nightingales and sweet poetry! Is this not your artistic heritage or background? In the case of Abbas Kiarostami, for example, Persian poetry is clearly a source that he draws on for artistic sustenance.

JP: Perhaps. Perhaps poetry is part of his artistic background. I, on the other hand, have never had a great liking for poetry. The reason for that may be that I've never managed to learn more than ten verses by heart! What I know well is cinema. I studied film-making at college and have felt our social problems. I exercise my profession with an acute social awareness and command of the art of film-making.

SR: Why do you think that an art such as film-making, which has such a short history, has thrived so much compared to other arts, which have a much longer history in this country and culture?

JP: The length of the history of an art does not guarantee the superior success of that art. Cinema is only a hundred years old. Perhaps twenty years ago poetry was superior to cinema in this country. Why? Because twenty years ago we did not have the same access to multimedia as we do today. Today, as soon as an Iranian child opens his or her eyes, he or she will be watching moving images; before they can talk or read and write, these children will have accumulated a vast knowledge of film and deep emotions towards those images: they'll laugh, become sad, angry or happy with every image they see. Films educate them and show them how to perceive problems or how to deal with them. They have a much stronger relationship to images than to words. The historical heritage of poetry or cinema is meaningless for them.

SR: So, in a way, cinema reduces or even cuts off the connection of children with their culture and historical heritage.

JP: No, I am not saying that. What I am trying to say is that images elicit primal emotional responses in human beings. The more a child develops, the more he or she realises that cinema is a profession, and that the historical and cultural background of the film-maker is vital for cinema's growth. This is especially the case in Iran. I've served on the jury of many foreign festivals and have witnessed that whenever an Iranian film was shown, there was heightened excitement and enthusiasm amongst the audience. This was due to the freshness of the message and the art of those films. Iranian films are especially concerned with human suffering and human struggle and thus fill a gap that the cinema of the West increasingly fails to address. Thus, one can in no way claim that such films cut off the viewer's connection with history, culture or humanity.

SR: How do you assess the relation between cinema and other arts in Iran?

JP: Cinema contains all arts. All arts, from poetry to music, theatre, painting, dancing, photography etc. find a place inside the art of cinema. In a way, our cinema can contain and reflect the millennia of Iranian culture, art and history. Both consciously and unconsciously it

is preoccupied with this rich background. Cinema can see and show things in a myriad of ways. For example, take the picture of you and me sitting in this room; we can set up the camera in at least two hundred different places in this room and each would depict our interaction differently. A non-Iranian might place his or her camera differently from an Iranian film-maker. The camera's point of view inevitably shows my Iranian historical and cultural background and the influence it has on the image that I convey. The angle from which your camera looks at the world and gives an image of the world immediately reveals your background.

SR: Would you say that through the angle of their camera Iranian film-makers forge a certain Iranian identity?

JP: That is something that critics and social scientists can talk about.

SR: So you do not consciously forge an Iranian identity?

JP: I only make films. My films take a certain path. The people I work with and I are certainly under the influence of our *sujet* – our object of observation, namely the Iranian society. Whether we influence our *sujet* – that we cannot know. That would be an altogether different subject of discussion.

SR: In view of both the past and the present situation of Iran, many renowned writers and artists have felt and feel that they live in a sort of exile within their own country. Writers such as Hedayat⁴ or film-makers such as Golestan⁵ or Shahid-Saless⁶ felt this internal exile so acutely that they ended up leaving their country altogether, although they were not politically persecuted. Is it an ungrateful task to be an avant-garde artist in this country?

⁴ Sadegh Hedayat (1903-1951) is perhaps the most prominent figure amongst Iran's avant-garde writers. He revolutionised Persian literature with his radically modern prose. In the West, he is best known for his novel *The Blind Owl* (1938) which is written in a cryptically minimalist style. In the course of his life, Hedayat became increasingly estranged from his homeland and suffered many bouts of depression. He ended his suffering by committing suicide in Paris in 1951.

⁵ Ebrahim Golestan (1922-) Iranian film-maker, whose artistic oeuvre spans more than half a century, is one of the most important pioneers in Iranian cinema. His radically modern films in the 1960s and 1970s shocked both the audience and the Shah's court (which was brought down by the 1979 Revolution). His open love-affair with the renowned, avant-garde poetess Forough further alienated him from his people. Golestan left Iran for England five years before the revolution.

⁶ Sohrab Shahid-Saless (1943-1998) was one of the most important figures in Iranian author's cinema. He was famous for his often bleak, documentary style, by which he depicted the emptiness at heart of human existence. Shahid-Saless left Iran for Germany three years before the 1979 revolution, where he was an active film-maker. He left Germany in 1991 for the United States, where he died in 1998.

JP: Their internal exile was due to their own personalities. As I've already mentioned, Iranian films in general and my films in particular can connect with all people from all social levels and backgrounds in different ways. For example, when you see an Iranian film it usually addresses a 'current' topic, which is witnessed by people from all parts of society. For example, when you see my films you see a group of women who have served their sentence and, once out of prison, have to struggle to find a refuge; or you see a group of girls who, despite being aware that they will not be given permission to watch a football match in a stadium, dress as boys and struggle to get in there. They all end up getting arrested and unite on the bus that is supposed to take them to prison. This is not fiction; it is a true story that happens in this country quite often. I have not invented or created a story! Every single Iranian who watches this film has experienced or witnessed such a conflict with the authorities. The masses of Iranian people understand, feel empathise with this story. By witnessing this event on the screen, they see deeper layers and discover new things. This gives them pleasure. The more aware an audience is, the more layers they discover and the more pleasure they feel while discovering. This means that I, as a film-maker, can connect to numerous people according to their level of understanding. I never say – 'screw the audience! I do not want to have anything to do with you! I have made this film only for myself!' Those who experience an internal exile have this attitude. And this attitude is a personal thing, and has nothing to do with society.

SR: In one word, you do not feel you're in exile in this country?

JP: Not a bit! I am not in exile in my country; amongst my people. From the viewpoint of the regime that rules here, I might be in exile. During the last Fajr film festival (2006) they had placed me in the section reserved for guests, not for film-makers or jurors or critics. They had thrown me into a meaningless corner of the festival. They thought they had thrown me into exile. I answered them in a piece I wrote as follows: 'When somebody invites you to their house, the rules of courtesy dictate that you thank those who think of themselves as the owners of the house for their kind invitation. Ladies and Gentlemen, although I feel like a stranger in this festival, I am not a stranger in this place. They [threw] me into exile, but I am the one who belongs to this place. They have no right to do this to me.' I want everybody to know that we are the sand at the bottom of the stream. We stay where we are and those who have violently seized our dwelling and think that they have thrown us into exile are doomed

to go away – like the stream, they too will flow away. The secret of our success is that we have not severed our connection with this land and the people who live in it.

SR: Many believe that the secret of the international success of film-makers like you is that you make films only according to the tastes of Western film festivals. You and your colleagues are labelled as ‘festival film-makers’.

JP: This is one of the tactics that the Ministry of Islamic Guidance [uses] to isolate us both from our people and the international community. As soon as they realised that the interest in Iranian films was growing worldwide, they started to invent such labels for internationally renowned film-makers. They did not know of any better way to confront us. So they started to denounce us by playing the nationalist card. The irony of this tactic is that nationalism is at odds with the Islamic ideology of the regime! Let me make it clearer for you: we do not have an Iranian National Football team in this country. We have a Football team of the Islamic Republic of Iran! It's the foreign football teams that our media name as ‘the American National Football Team’, or ‘the English National Team’ or ‘the German National Team’! We do not call our radio and television ‘national’; we call them the radio and television of the Islamic Republic of Iran or we do not call our parliament national; we call it the parliament of the Islamic Republic of Iran! All institutions in this country have been given an ‘Islamic’ label in the past thirty years. It is only when the regime wants to denounce somebody or trick people into doing something against their will that the ‘national’ label is used. Yes, national sentiment is completely at odds with their ideology. But as soon as one of our films wins a prestigious prize at a Western festival, they start to denounce it as ‘anti-national’! They don't even dare call it ‘anti-Islamic’ because they know that that would not work with the people. You see, a regime for which Islam counts far more than the nation of Iran does, starts to abuse the national feelings of the people, but not their religious ones, as soon as it decides to throw an artist into exile and sever his or her ties with this country. So they label such an artist an ‘anti-Iranian film-maker’ a ‘festival film-maker’ etc. But we don't give up. We use all our wit and tricks in order to smuggle our films out of this country and show them to the world. If we don't, they ban our films and stop them from being seen. All my banned films, such as *Off-side*, are available in my country as pirate copies and on the internet – because I was able to smuggle [that film] out of Iran and have it screened at the Berlin film festival! This film is sold all over [Iran] by underground traders because of the international attention that it received at the Berlin film festival. There is a huge underground

network that satisfies our people's thirst for our films. So, of course the regime tries to sever rapidly in the last our contact with our real audience by means of giving us such labels.

SR: So the more they call you a 'festival film-maker' the more you become a 'people's film-maker'?

JP: Yes. They try their utmost to separate us from our Iranian audience. They keep telling them that we don't have anything to do with Iranians and only let ourselves be led by Western tastes. Personally, I don't care for anybody's taste. I make my films neither according to the tastes of the regime, nor according to those of Western festivals nor those of the Iranian audience. While I'm making my films, I don't care for anybody's taste but my own: what do I have to say? This is what I have learnt in all these years. The one good thing that my success at festivals has taught me is that the more original, the more 'me', the fresher my film was, the greater its success. I don't give in to anybody; neither the government, nor the people, nor the foreign festivals. I don't make films according to Western or Eastern or 'outer' or 'inner' tastes. I only make films according to my own taste. And I only make one film every three or four years, although I could make a film every year and make a lot of money that way. Unfortunately that's what's predominantly happening now in New Iranian Cinema. I, on the other hand, get deeply involved with my films and that's why I don't regret having made any of my five feature films; all five have had a very good reception worldwide.

SR: One of the reasons why you and Iranian film-makers of your calibre are called 'festival film-makers' is the fact that foreign producers increasingly invest money in your projects. Some believe that Western sponsors influence your work, as their investment obliges you to some extent to make films according to their tastes. Furthermore, their investment is yet another aspect of how the West exploits our culture, as the money that they invest in an Iranian film is a fraction of the money that they would put into a French or American film and, consequently, for them the risk-to-profit ratio of doing film business in Iran is much more favourable than it would be in the West. What are your thoughts on this claim?

JP: I do not agree with that at all. I, for example, always aim to find foreign producers, but only work with them if they agree to share the production [costs] with me. That is to say, the main capital comes from my own production company. The money that they put into my production is not a considerable sum anyway. I actually don't need their money to make my

film. As you mentioned before, the cost of film-making in Iran is considerably lower than in the West. It is so much less, that someone like me can produce his or her film on his or her own in this country! The status that I have now reached means that I could *choose* any producer I wanted in this country. They would probably invest more money in my projects than a Western producer. There is no fundamental need here for a foreign investor. So, what do these people mean by calling foreign investment ‘an exploitation’ of Iranian culture?! If anything, we exploit the foreign investors! The foreign investors must accept all the work for PR and distribution [abroad]. They must see to it that my film is shown all over the world. They must contact important distributors. I want my film to be shown as widely as possible; in as many countries as possible. I don’t understand why some people start to speak of ‘exploitation’ when foreign money is invested in Iranian film projects! Why aren’t these people’s sensibilities offended when the same companies invest money in South American or African films? Why is an Iranian film-maker labelled a ‘festival film-maker’ as soon as he or she acquires a certain international status but other Asian film-makers of the same calibre are not? A film festival like Cannes or Venice considers hundreds of films from all over the world. Why is it only Iranian cinema among all those different kinds of cinema that is ‘exploited’?

Look, this ‘Third World’ vocabulary is only used by the Islamic regime because they are vehemently against our work. They accuse us of treason whenever they can, using all means in their power. They don’t like the fact that Iranian cinema appeals to the West. I’m sure you have noticed the recent fall in the number of Iranian films at international festivals. This phenomenon gives the Islamic regime a lot of pleasure. Now they go around saying that the Iranian wave is over! Nobody buys Iranian films anymore! I would like to close our discussion on festivals by saying that a festival is only an opportunity. Yes, I like to finish a film [in time] so that I can send it to a festival, because an internationally renowned festival is a good opportunity for me to show what I have [achieved]. It’s like a fair! Even big-budget, international and Hollywood projects want to be presented at prestigious festivals. For example, *The Da Vinci Code* rapidly in the last at the last Cannes festival I went to – it was a big-budget Hollywood production, but it still wanted to be at Cannes. Why? Because Cannes can open up many markets for your product! Why should I, as an Iranian film-maker, not benefit from such an opportunity? Why? Even the regime-controlled Fajr Film Festival in this country is a fair where you can introduce your product into the market. That’s it about festivals as far as I am concerned.

SR: Do you not see this fair also as a place where Iranian films inevitably get involved in the propaganda machinery of the regime? After all, the West thinks that these films represent the Iranian state or at least that they're at the festival because they comply with the Iranian state's policies.

JP: No, not at all. As I mentioned before, the presence of Iranian films at important festivals such as Cannes and Venice has faded rapidly in the last few years. The authorities in Iran have been celebrating this development in the regime-friendly papers. With voices that can hardly hide their glee, they show their so-called 'concern' for the death of Iranian New Wave at talk-shows and round tables! They report that Cannes has not asked our film-makers to send them films! Why? Because there seems to be an absurd law by which internationally successful Iranian films are labelled 'festival films', whereas films from all other nations are exempt from it. There is an absurd law according to which foreign investment in Iranian films counts as 'exploitation', but there's no problem whatsoever when the same sponsors invest in films made in other countries. We have to get rid of this antiquated, 'Third-World' vocabulary. If we want Iranian cinema to become a member of the club of important cinemas, we have to stop seeing ourselves as members of the Third World Club with no way out.

SR: Mr. Panahi, I thank you for this interview.